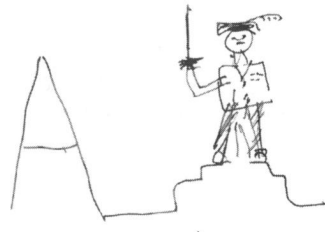


Iconoclasm Dictionary

Michael Taussig



Antiquated

Why does iconoclasm seem so dated? Are there no more icons to smash? After all, who builds statues these days or, like Hugo Chavez and Saddam Hussein, has portraits of themselves hugging skyscrapers? Only Third World dictators, and they quickly put a stop to the slightest sign of iconoclasm. Of course the Stars and Stripes fly proudly over

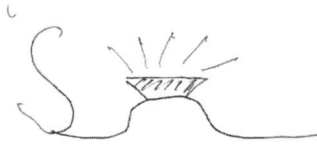
every secondhand car lot, gas station, and fast-food outlet, but nowadays people seem wary of taking it on—not like the good old days when people would wear the flag on their jeans bottoms or burn it to make the Great Communicator mad. But then you have to consider the proposition that nothing could be more iconoclastic than using the flag to sell cars, gasoline, and fast food, such that this particular icon now exists in a special limbo preserved for retired icons or icons that have seen better days and now deserve some well-earned rest. Today it seems the world has been divided between places begging for a little bit of iconoclasm and those where it has lost its bite. Truly, protests have gotten harder to launch in the Western democracies. Along with kettling by police of mass demonstrations and the erection of chain mail fences closing off targets, as occurred at the G20 protests in Toronto, so-called free speech and free markets allow everyman to be an iconoclast and yet search in vain for a protest site to get close to. That in itself, of course, is a belated sign of success—that the forces of law and order have to expend such spectacular military force to stop iconoclasts; and yet it must make the bankers and politicians feel grand as well. Of course what's important here is that even in this digital age, iconoclasm must be largely a physical affair with the human body in close proximity to the icon. It seems that no amount of ferocious blogging or vile, anonymous online commentary can get even close to the impact of human bodies marching down streets or tearing down a statue. How strange, you say, that even today the human body could assume such presence! Could it be that the power of icons, like the power of iconoclasm, depends on this presence made intimate? And what could be more intimate than destruction?

This would explain why icons suddenly burst into consciousness and seem to come alive only with their defacement. You smash them and—lo and behold!—they have become icons. This back-to-front logic is of a piece with the rhythm of taboo and transgression, attraction and repulsion that runs through all societies and all of social life. Even in good old days—especially in *the* good old days—icons begged for a little bit of iconoclasm because their aura owes much to the curious ambivalence of taboo as the prohibition of desire: that which endows an

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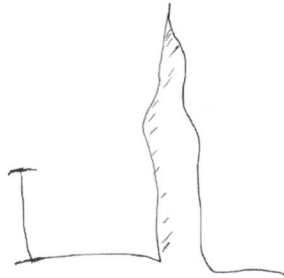
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icon with its respect and prestige also demands its defacement. When the prime minister of Australia, a politician not especially fond of Australia's allegiance to Britain, touched the queen's butt many years ago...what an uproar! He said it was an accident. Well, so what! But that butt had been crying out for a touch and, what's more, in being touched, accidentally or not, its iconicity soared. Iconoclasm is written into the icon. Taboos are meant to be broken. Well, that's how it used to be anyway. In the good old days.



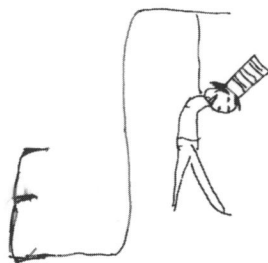
Sacred

Now, however, it seems that something strange and wonderful has taken place. Before, there was a discernible distinction between sacred and profane, between the taboo and its transgression. But now it seems as if transgression itself has become the new sacred. Is that possible? It was complicated enough before. But now? Oh my God!



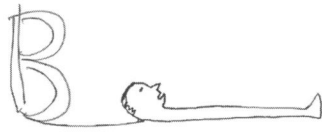
Icons

Icons used to be icons. You could spot them a mile off, maybe on a pedestal or accompanied by a brass band, touching the sky, with bird shit all over—not like shop and bank windows, shiny surfaces with stuff to buy on the other side, along with all the bellyaching that goes on these days for transparency. When the arcades were built early in the 19th century, which Walter Benjamin made the object of a study meant to rouse Europe from the death-sleep of capitalism, there were no shop windows in the streets, no display of things for sale. Icons were really icons in those days. You could spot them a mile off.



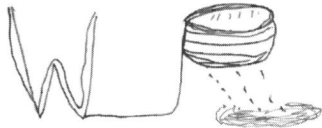
Effigy

I recall in decades past seeing photos of effigies set alight in public protests in Third World countries, especially of Uncle Sam with a stovepipe hat and striped breeches. But that seems long ago. A strange sounding word—*effigy*—it recruits magical powers through pronunciation as much as anything else, especially powers of hate and destruction that despoil the copy of what is to be hurt—a process that Sir James George Frazer of *Golden Bough* fame called “sympathetic magic” (1922). A lot of what is called criticism has some of this going on too—copying the object in order to burn it up, like smashing the shop window.



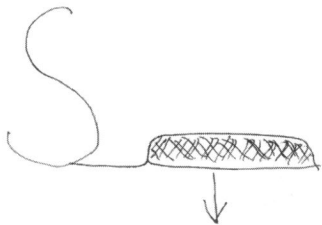
Body

The human body can be an especially potent target of iconoclasm, as witnessed by the young vendor in Tunisia who set himself afire in December 2010, providing the spark that sent the dictator and his cronies scuttling. Before that this humble street vendor was not an icon. Before that he was anything but an icon. He needed self-immolation to make him one and he will be remembered for a while, maybe a year, maybe less, and songs will be sung and poetry recited and his photo held aloft. As I write in late January 2011 other Middle East dictators propped up by the US are in serious trouble because of this too. Egypt is tottering.



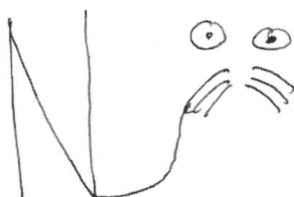
Wikileaks

Is secrecy an icon and revelation iconoclasm? Is it not amazing that one of our best sources of insight into the background of what is happening in the Middle East comes from leaked diplomatic cables? Who or what is the icon here: Julian Assange; Private First-Class Bradley Manning of the US armed forces, stewing in solitary confinement; or the US government? The rage on the part of the US government over the leaks and the baying for blood by some US congressmen testifies to the battle being fought over this question. These are nothing however compared with the real icon, which is the sacred nature of state secrets.



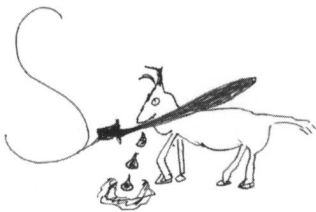
Suicide Bombers

These are iconoclasts supreme. Yet it is strange how their action has become routinized and they are now seen more as bombers than suicide bombers. James C. Scott wrote a memorable book called *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985), making me ask whether suicide bombing is one such weapon, a sign of desperation in the face of a highly mechanized enemy such as the Israel Defense Forces or the US and Canadian armies in Afghanistan that put massive resources into protecting their bodies? But surely suicide bombing is not just another weapon of the weak, a matter of fox-like Brechtian cunning? The moral element in any act of iconoclasm is stupendously brought forth by self-immolation. It is thus extremely important that we in the West take note of how the media has set a de-iconoclastic tone such that suicide bombers are now just bombers.



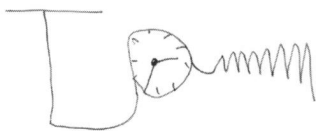
Nietzsche

As for the moral element in any act of iconoclasm, how might we first think of the value of destruction that the larger-than-life mid-19th-century Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin, called a creative passion? In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche has a paragraph, “We Destroy Only As Creators,” that seems like the other side of the same coin.



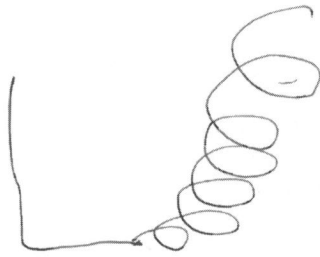
Sacrifice

This is confusing. Nietzsche calls attention to self-immolation as the weapon of the weak to dominate the strong. Think back again on the young man setting himself aflame in Tunisia. Christ is an archetype of humility, and *ressentiment* is the term Nietzsche uses for this performance of abjection. But on the other hand—and it is a very big hand indeed—sacrifice is the supreme act of prodigality, of giving for the sake of giving, that Georges Bataille, follower of Nietzsche, called *depense*, of which sex and sacrifice are the great examples. Sacrifice consecrates that which it destroys, writes Bataille, while Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert emphasize that the victim becomes a god. How much greater does this become when self-sacrifice is involved?



Time

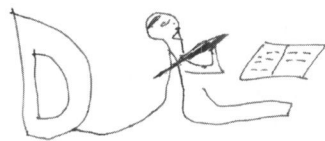
Time is iconic. Just try being iconoclastic by having your own time, like the Greek I met in Athens who boasted that he never kept appointments and turned up whenever he felt like it. Nothing would bring the modern world to a halt more quickly—certainly more quickly than torching police cars or breaking bank windows. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), Walter Benjamin distinguishes homogenous time from heterogenous time. The former belongs to clock-time and to the idea of progress. But heterogenous time, which he also calls the “time of the now,” is a sudden rupture in time when something in the present leapfrogs unexpectedly so as to constellate with something in the forgotten past. There is a cessation of movement, a strange nothingness out of time, and here it is when the Messiah may return—in other words a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.” Benjamin refers us to holidays today as sad vestiges interrupting the flow of time with traces of this other time, the time of the now. He thinks of the calendar as a monument of such forgotten historical consciousness. During the July Revolution in France in 1830, one event showed this consciousness to be still alive. On the first day of fighting, several different clock towers were fired upon simultaneously. Time stood still.



Lightning

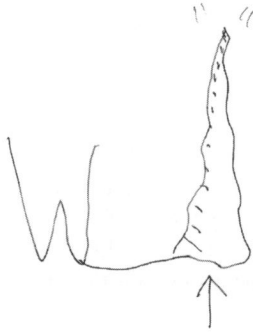
Foucault is fascinated by what I call the back-to-front logic of taboo and transgression of which iconoclasm is an example. Along with Bataille he is not fazed by the fact that transgression merely suspends the taboo. Both philosophers instead direct our attention to what Benjamin calls the “now time,” the *nunc stans*, of the heterogenous time opened up, even if only momentarily, by iconoclasm. Neither of them

mentions Benjamin, who actually attended some of the sessions of the College de Sociologie in Paris in 1938–39 where the taboo and the sacred came in for a lot of analysis. But there is a remarkable convergence of thought here. Along with Bataille, Foucault thinks language fails us at this moment. Bataille writes of thought jumping the rails, of how when the very heavens open we can speak in nothing but clichés. Foucault, however, becomes positively rhapsodic at this incapacity to speak and lets fly with a torrent of heightened language, a sort of hysteria in which the very impossibility makes the speaker redouble his or her efforts to express what is happening. There is first a lot of geometry in an effort to show how infinite is the experience, the experience of iconoclasm, meaning the experience of the paradox in which each step of rupture or of breaking the taboo results in yet another taboo and the effort multiplies, feeding on itself. Hence we hear a lot about spirals rather than breaks or ruptures: “the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can break” (“A Preface to Transgression,” 1977). We hear of circles too, but not your typical smooth circle. Instead it is a circle made of “fissures, abrupt descents, and broken contours.” It is a “misshapen and craglike language” folded back on itself and continuously questioning its limits. Then there are the cosmic and meteorological metaphors in which iconoclasm is likened to “the solar inversion of satanic denial,” or to “a flash of lightning in the night which, from the beginning of time, gives a dense and black intensity to the night it denies [...] yet owes to the night the stark clarity of its manifestation.” The reason Foucault writes in such a breathtaking manner in my opinion is because he is doubly stressed compared to Bataille. It is now maddeningly complex. Bataille may have been a proto-postmodernist, but Foucault is the real thing and for him there is, after the Death of God, no solid taboo to butt against such that transgression itself becomes the new god and as such takes the form of sex which, as he insists, has to be spoken about in order to remain a secret. Oh my God!



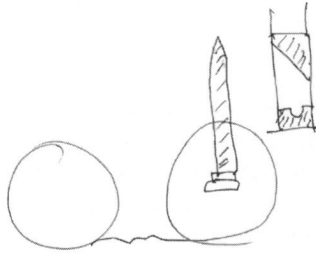
Death of the Author

They say you should always keep an author separate from his or her text, that it is wrong to allow biography into literary criticism. Some go further and talk of the Death of the Author and, as did Barthes, relate such deaths to the songs of shamans acting as mere vehicles for a sacred text. Yet I cannot not think about Foucault as not only gay but for much of his life in the closet, just as I cannot not think of an activist in Uganda as gay when he was beaten to death with a hammer in late January 2011 for being gay. Can we really say there are no more taboos? And what happens when gay sex becomes no less tabooed than straight sex? Sex is always taboo, right, even in marriage?



Wisdom

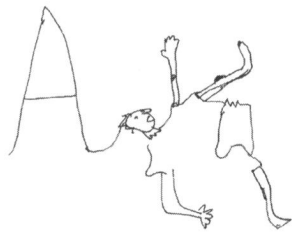
Why is it that wise-sounding people are quick to tell you that iconoclasm actually boosts the icon and thus betrays the iconoclast? There is so much joy in destroying the icon and even more, it seems, in destroying the joy the iconoclast enjoys.



Obelisk

Some societies have permanent sites for iconoclasm. This is worth thinking about. Like the sea, iconoclastic waves batter against this Supreme Being, only to fall back again as the Supreme Being rises intact or stronger than ever. Such is the huge obelisk in what came to be called the Place of Concord in the center of Paris. But before it got that name of Concord it was the site of the guillotine during the French

Revolution where Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were beheaded. Now, that's iconoclasm for you! Perhaps we can call this sacrifice, but in any event what to me is eye-opening is the layering of history, from the guillotine to the obelisk, from the king to the republic, and in particular the unconscious or barely conscious manner by which myth and magic converge to create a permanent site for iconoclasm such that suddenly—like the human body set afire in Tunisia—the history and magical power of the obelisk can, on iconoclastic occasions, leap out at us. Weighing 250 metric tons and standing 75 feet high, there seems as much magic—technological and statist—entailed in its transport from its home in Egypt as there was in its original purpose there, which seems tied in with the worship of both the sun and the dead, mindful of the name given Louis XIV: “the Sun-King.” Two mighty states, the theological state of ancient Egypt and the republican one of modern France, converged in forming what is surely the ritual center of the French state and where the German army set up its headquarters during World War II. In 1993 the AIDS activists of ACT UP managed to unroll a gigantic pink condom covering the obelisk. We always knew the obelisk existed there, surrounded by snarling traffic. But once the pink condom was in place, the obelisk truly came into being. As an illustration of what he meant by the “dialectical image,” Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* (1999) cites Chateaubriand (born 1768), who wrote about the Obelisk de la Concorde: “The hour will come when the obelisk of the desert will find once again, on Murderers’ Square, the silence and solitude of Luxor.”



Animism

Is there a career or life history to an iconoclastic act? If so it might go like this. First the stage of invisibility or taken-for-grantedness of the icon. Then the stage of its destruction or humiliation, which automatically leads to the third stage, that of resurrection, as the icon explodes into visibility because of

the aforesaid destruction or humiliation. It is no longer taken for granted. It has burst into consciousness, not only in its damaged, destroyed, or humiliated form, but also, in memory, at least—as it was before its disgrace when it existed in its noble, pristine, pretraumatized, form. Then comes sometimes a fascinating fourth stage, a moment of animation or animism in which the damaged icon comes alive in a most disturbing way (as objects are not supposed to have life like this), bred of violence and death now mixed with sacred or magical emanation. If this is true or true enough, then it seems a terrible simplification—an impoverishment—to say that iconoclasm paradoxically increases the power of the icon. Yes! Agreed. But so much more is going on. When Neil Roberts felt moved to pick up the damaged statue of the Queen of England, along with her consort, the Duke of Edinburgh, decapitated and amputated, and place them in his pick-up truck and take them to an undisclosed location, he seems to have felt that something unbearable had occurred. “It’s gone beyond a bit of fun now,” he said. It was as if in the depths of their destruction the statues had come alive.



Contagion and Proliferation

There is another stage as well, more like a flow, when once iconoclasm has occurred, it is like pulling a thread in a stocking: the whole thing can unravel. Foucault’s spirals come to mind. A person who breaks a taboo, for example, is likely to be an object of dread, full of some evil toxin that can spread to other people. Freud specifically refers to this as “contagion” in his book on

taboo. AIDS was exactly like this for the first few years, and still creates a chill, which is what is happening to Muslims in the US with the congressional hearings organized by an IRA militant, Republican party stalwart Peter King, who endorsed terrorism in Ireland and now endorses the use of state terrorism to spread the contagion of fear.



Castration

This is a quote from a news source:

A phallic phenomenon was short-lived after police told a 16-year-old boy to remove a snow sculpture emulating male genitalia from his front yard on East River Street and Yale Avenue. Roman King said it took about 20 minutes to shape the 7-foot sculpture about two days ago. He said he created it “just to see what people would think,” and he has gotten “car honks with people giving us the thumbs up,” from drivers while it was standing.

“My friends really like it,” King said. But after police came by Thursday afternoon and told King to remove his interpretative model of the male sex organ, he said this was the last such sculpture he was likely to make. (*Ohio Chronicle-Telegram*, 21 January 2011)

It is hard to say what is more iconoclastic here; building the phallus in the front yard or making the sculptor tear it down. Then we have to consider his name, *Roman King*. This quotation has some strange wording, such as “emulating” as in the “snow sculpture *emulating* male genitalia,” and “interpreting” as in being made to “remove his *interpretive* model of the male sex organ.” On the one hand it seems that the mere act of imitating is to run the risk of exceeding reality in a morally disturbing and even exciting manner, especially when it comes to the phallus. On the other hand we have the safe harbor of cognitive relativity with the introduction of the notion that any representation is merely an interpretation. Yet surely what is disturbing about the phallus is that it is the very model of the icon and of iconicity. What does it mean, then, to make an icon out of an icon, of the mother of all icons? I recall a brilliant colleague in Ann Arbor explaining to me many years ago Charles Sanders Peirce’s trichotomization of the sign into the icon, the index, and the sign proper, or symbol. As I recall his explanation, the icon is evoked when we speak of a phallic symbol such as a skyscraper—which is, he said, iconic on account of the shape. So why don’t the police order skyscrapers razed? Why don’t motorists honk when they drive past a skyscraper? Could it be because the skyscraper is actually an index and not an icon, an index meaning that there exists a cause-and-effect relationship between the building and an assumed phallic drive to dominate on the part of architects? As I recall further it all got dreadfully confusing because having trichotomized so neatly, Pierce then went to say that each category contained elements of the others. No such thing, therefore, as a pure icon? Where does that leave iconoclasm? Ask Roman King.

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